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No ordinary time, no ordinary men: the relationship between Harvey Cushing and Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1928–1939*

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The authors elucidate the strong personal relationship that developed between Dr. Harvey Cushing and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) from 1928 to 1939, as manifested in their frequent letters to each other. The relationship was initiated by the marriage of their children. Through his correspondence with FDR, Cushing was able to affect several medical issues of the period. The relationship of these two individuals is set within the historical, social, and political contexts of the times.

Key Words • **Harvey Cushing** • **Franklin Delano Roosevelt**

In the fall of 1928, Eleanor Roosevelt went to Cambridge, Massachusetts to visit her son James, then a junior at Harvard University, who casually informed her that he was engaged to be married. His fiancée was a slender, attractive blond woman named Betsey, the daughter of Harvey Cushing. James took his mother to Brookline, Massachusetts to meet his fiancée's parents. In a subsequent letter to her husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), then governor of the state of New York, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote:

> She, Betsey is a nice child, family excellent, nothing to be said against it, but I regret that he wished to tie himself down so young. However, it will be a good influence and, in any case, we can do nothing about it. He tells me that they expect to be married two years from now.

When Betsey Cushing was introduced to Sara Delano Roosevelt, FDR's domineering, outspoken mother, Mrs. Roosevelt's first words were: "I understand your father is a surgeon. Surgeons remind me of my butcher." Thus began an improbable relationship between FDR and Harvey Cushing, two of the giants of the 20th century.

Coming Together: 1928–1933

At the time, Dr. Cushing was the Moseley Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School and surgeon-in-chief at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital. He was the dominant figure in neurological surgery in the world, the mentor for the next generation of neurosurgeons at home and abroad, a skillful and meticulous surgeon, and an innovative scientific investigator with an array of seminal laboratory and clinical publications. He was also an elegant, witty, insightful lecturer, essayist, and writer on a wide variety of topics, as well as the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Sir William Osler.

On learning of the marital intentions of the young couple, Cushing and FDR exchanged the following letters:

Cushing to Roosevelt

> January 26, 1929
>
> Dear Governor:
>
> Among other young men who more or less informally frequent our house is your son James. I used to know him as one of the tall ones who bumped their heads on the chandeliers. I told the children they should limit their playmates to ones of proper height—say 5' 9", which is mine. Instead of this, my wife, when I was away, had the chandeliers removed except the one in my room (she didn't dare). As a consequence, it has been easy going for the 'tall ones', and one evening, your son (skillfully dodging the chandelier which should have protected me) dropped in to my room and said, in effect, that though I may not have observed the fact he was taking notice of Betsey. I rejoined that he and Betsey were young and would probably outgrow it. . . .
>
> I should have known something of this kind would happen if we came here to Boston to live—that one of my daughters would 'take up' with a Harvard Democrat when there are so many desirable Yale Republicans in that part of the country where we really belong. The chief trouble with Jimmie is that he makes himself so agreeable, which is also one of Betsey's faults. So what can a man do?
>
> Anyhow, I'm relieved to learn that Jimmie is recovering from his pneumonia and can confess to have been anxious about him.

Roosevelt to Cushing

> February 5, 1929

* The title of this paper is adapted from a speech given by Eleanor Roosevelt at the Democratic Party Convention held in Chicago during the summer of 1940, when she urged the delegates to nominate FDR for an unprecedented third term: "This is no ordinary time. No time for weighing anything except what we can best do for the country as a whole."

My dear Doctor:

I am worried about that chandelier! That youngster of mine is a persistent "Cuss" and I am reasonably certain that with the connivance of Betsey and your better half you will some day discover either that the chandelier has been removed, or that you are living in another house. You and I might as well be philosophical because this younger generation not only knows what it wants, but just how to get it!

Take this pneumonia as an example: Betsey and Jimmie undoubtedly decided last year that Thomasville is a pretty good place to spend the winter. Problem—how to work it: Jimmie collects the flu bug, Betsey joins him, they sell the idea to their doting mothers, bribe one of your soft-hearted Albany doctors, and now are apparently all set for Thomasville in a couple of weeks. What can an unfortunate father do?

I honestly think that it is time for you and me to form a union and I do hope that if you are passing through Albany on a "cutting up" party you will stop over (after parking your knives in the parcel room) and discuss a permanent organization with me.

On the whole I think well of those two youngsters of ours, and that Betsey is just about 100%!

Both families had some misgivings about the announcement of a formal engagement, primarily because the couple were so young. James Roosevelt was 20 years of age, a college student with no clear plans for the future, and Betsey Cushing was the same age.

Cushing to Roosevelt

March 16, 1929

Dear Governor:—

On my own part (to plunge into the subject) I think those young things of ours ought to postpone the announcement of their engagement for another year. They want to do it instantly. The best compromise I have been able to make with Betsey is that they will wait until you come down here in June. You can then look us over and if you like our looks as much as Jimmy appears to, we can then make it a mutual announcement just before my family sails for abroad. This will save much fuss, feathers and confetti—it seems to me.

It is a matter on which I would like to have your and Mrs. Roosevelt's opinion. Of course, if it (an earlier announcement) is going to add in any way to the happiness of these two children, and Betsey and Jimmy both insist it will, I shall give way.

Mrs. Cushing favors letting them do as they like. In the past when we have disagreed she has usually been in the right.

Roosevelt to Cushing

April 3, 1929

Dear Dr. Cushing:—

Many thanks for your note. Like you, I am pacing the floor with hands raised to heaven exclaiming "what can a poor devil of a father do?"

Your logic seems to be:

1. It would be much better for our children to postpone formal announcement for a year.

2. Failing that, it would be best to postpone it until June.

3. Failing that, we might just as well let them announce it now. In this you have my respectful and hearty concurrence. My wife also throws up both hands.

I suppose, as a matter of fact, that it is awfully hard on them to have to pretend, and I suppose that means that if my wife can arrange to go on to Brookline the end of the month, "the feast of the announcement" can then be celebrated.

I wish much that I could go to Boston also, but just as soon as I sign or veto six hundred and eight bills, I am departing post haste for Warm Springs. In any event, I shall see you in June and, in the meantime, keep up your courage and we shall have a "consolation" party at that time.

The formal engagement was announced at a tea in Brookline, Massachusetts in April 1929. The wedding was scheduled for June 1930 after James Roosevelt's graduation from Harvard.

Roosevelt to Cushing

March 12, 1930

My dear Moses:— . . .

My better half has made a demand that within three days I give her a complete list of all political and business associates whom I have shaken hands with during the past twenty-five years, in order that they may be invited to your wedding! I want to go on record as expressing my gratitude to you for paying for the event! I think you will find it cheaper in the long run to hire Mechanics' Hall. Perhaps Jim Curley† can introduce you to a good caterer. A shore dinner should prove the least expensive, but for heaven's sake get the best brand of beer!

I am making arrangements with the New Haven for two special trains leaving New York the week before the wedding and have told them to bill you.

Cushing to Roosevelt

March 15, 1930

Dear Governor,

I have your biblical letter. But don't you fool yourself! I got an idea last night from Jimmy and Betsey whom I saw leaving for a fancy dress ball. I am secretly procuring a disguise with copious whiskers and other accessories. If you should be listening in on the radio or should happen to have your ear on the ground, which I suppose is where you customarily have it, being a governor, you will, about June 1st, hear some peculiar vamoosing sounds, which will be me, taking to the long grass or the tall timber.

With respects to you and your wife, not forgetting Grandma, I am Paternally yours,

The wedding took place at Saint Paul's Church in Brookline in June 1930, followed by a reception at the Cushing home (Fig. 1). This gala affair was attended by an eclectic mix of approximately 1000 guests, including leaders in the worlds of diplomacy, medicine, politics, and society. Governor Roosevelt at the time was clearly the front runner for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States.

† Mayor of Boston (1930–1934) and governor of Massachusetts (1935–1937), Curley was the democratic "boss" of Boston and sometime supporter of FDR in politics.

FIG. 1. *Left:* Photograph of James Roosevelt and Betsey Cushing Roosevelt at their wedding in June 1930. *Right:* Article covering the event in the New York Daily News, June 5, 1930.

In a reminiscence about the wedding, James Roosevelt wrote:

> Later I kidded father about stealing the show. Oh said father—that was nothing. When your mother and I were married, her uncle, President Theodore Roosevelt, gave the bride away. After the ceremony, when TR moved into the library for a sip of punch, the crowd followed him as if he was the Pied Piper, leaving your mother and me standing all alone and forlorn.

After FDR's reelection to a second term as governor of New York in 1930, the widespread economic depression in the United States deepened. Roosevelt acted vigorously, utilizing the machinery of state government to shore up the economy and establishing the Temporary Emergency Relief organization, the first state relief agency. With the aid and guidance of Louis McHenry Howe, his political guru; James Farley, a leader in the New York State Democratic organization; and Eleanor Roosevelt, FDR gained the Democratic nomination for president at the convention in 1932.

In the subsequent presidential campaign, the only issue was the Depression. Using a series of addresses crafted by a team of outside advisors known as the Brain Trust, FDR promised recovery and reform, aid to the farmers, public development of electrical power, a balanced budget, and government restrictions to policing irresponsible economic power, a program known as the New Deal. Probably more persuasive than his policies was the contrast between the image of FDR smiling in vigorous confidence and President Hoover's unpopularity. Roosevelt won the election decisively, receiving an electoral vote of 472 as opposed to 49 for his opponent, and the Democrats commanded substantial majorities in both houses of Congress.

After the election, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to Cushing:

> November 14, 1932
>
> Dear Dr. Cushing:—
>
> I want to send you just a line though I am sure Franklin also was going to write you his thanks for your very nice letter.

> I wish you had been able to be here, but I realize that "someone must stay at home," and of course, a grandfather is very necessary to the welfare of his grandchild.
>
> Franklin has come through in splendid condition and I think is going forward to what, to me, seems extremely difficult work. I confess to a certain amount of trepidation.
>
> However, as the responsibility is not mine, I suppose this is an unnecessary fear on my part.
>
> I hope we will see you before very long. It is always a joy, and we were indeed glad to have Mrs. Cushing with us.

It is difficult to imagine now the depth of the economic crisis and the despair of the nation when FDR assumed the presidency on March 4, 1933. Most banks had closed and people's savings were lost. Industrial production was down to 56% of the 1929 level, farmers were in desperate shape with farm prices down 60% of 1929 levels, and 13 million or more persons (25% of the work force) were unemployed. Share prices on the New York Stock Exchange were $19 billion, down from $87 billion in 1929.

With the cooperation of Congress, FDR moved swiftly and decisively to develop a program of recovery and reform. In the now famous first 100 days of his first administration, the president declared an immediate bank holiday while the Reconstruction Finance Corporation bolstered banks that were viable with loans and purchases of bank stock. The powers of the Federal Reserve were increased. Bank reform and Federal Deposit Insurance were initiated. Mortgage relief outlined by the National Industrial Reform Act was implemented, and the Civilian Conservation Corps was established to employ young persons in reforestation and flood control.

Probably of greater importance than these measures was a sense conveyed to citizens of a despairing nation that there was now someone in command who was confident and self-assured, and would act immediately and vigorously on their behalf. Roosevelt's words expressed in his Inaugural Address of March 1933 constitute one of the great American speeches: "This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. . . . The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

The speech instilled a palpable feeling of hope in desperate times.

The year 1932 had marked the statutory retirement of Cushing from his position as Moseley Professor of Surgery at Harvard and surgeon-in-chief at Brigham. Although he was now free from clinical and administrative responsibilities, he had a difficult time adjusting to his new situation. After a prolonged series of letters and conversations with President Angell of Yale University, Cushing was persuaded to accept a newly created chair as Sterling Professor of Neurology, and this appointment was formally announced at the Yale commencement in June 1933. The economic depression had not spared Cushing because the Boston banking firm that had long handled his financial affairs had failed, and he was concerned about the necessity of starting "afresh as a wage earner, which is not easy at my time and place in life." Fortunately, the new chair included a salary and budget.

In the fall of 1933, Cushing moved from Brookline to New Haven, returning to the place where he had spent happy years as an undergraduate and for which he had maintained affection and warm attachments thereafter.

FIG. 2. Photograph showing Franklin Roosevelt and family on a cruise to Campobello in June 1933. *Front Row, Left to Right*: Eleanor Roosevelt, FDR, James Roosevelt. Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. is directly behind FDR, and behind James Roosevelt is John Roosevelt. The other individuals are unidentified.

In June 1933, FDR, who had a deep love of the sea, sailing, and naval traditions, took a brief vacation from the tumultuous events of his 1st months in office by sailing with his children and some friends on the schooner Amberjack from Cape Cod up the Maine coast to the Roosevelt summer home at Campobello in New Brunswick (Fig. 2). This marked the first time that FDR had returned to Campobello since August 1921, when he had been stricken there with a devastating attack of polio that had left his legs paralyzed.

Roosevelt had invited Cushing to join him for the trip, but Cushing replied:

> My greetings to you and my hats off to you! . . . Jimmie kindly suggested that I come to meet you but all the world and his wife will be there and though one more would make little difference, I will spare you.
>
> You have done a magnificent job, and the country feels as agitated at the thought of your venturing onto the briny deep—which most of them have never seen—as did the hen when her ducklings waddled into the pond.
>
> So take care of yourself and have a great time. They all seem to be as amphibious as you.

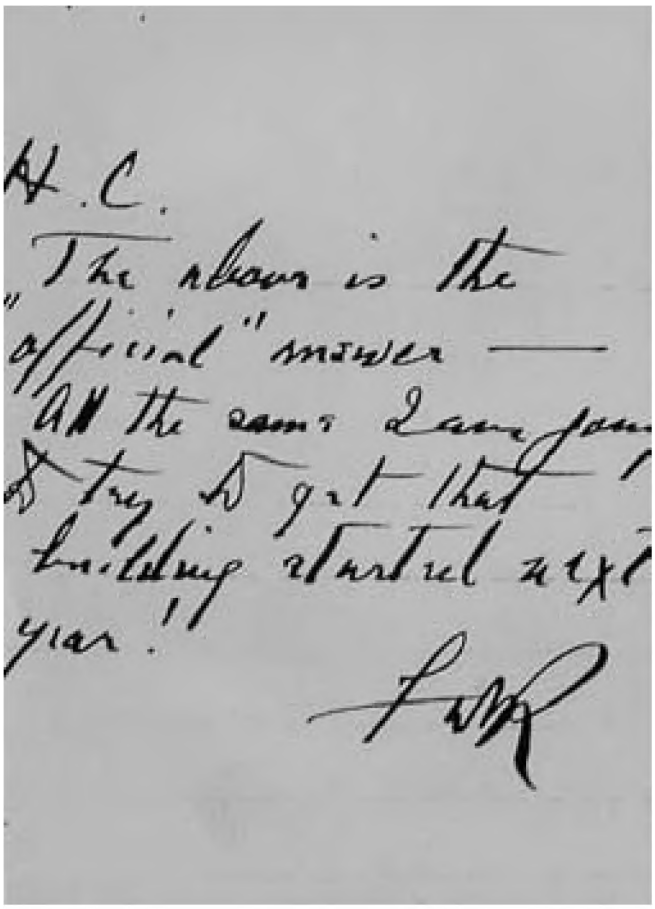

FIG. 3. A handwritten note from FDR to Harvey Cushing: "The above is the "official" answer—All the same I'm going to try to get that building started next year!"

Dialogue: 1933–1939

Although Cushing had a warm and affectionate personal relationship with FDR, by background, circumstances, and personal temperament, he remained an Ohio Republican and was emotionally opposed to many measures of the New Deal, which he believed put a premium on idleness and a disincentive to work.

Cushing to Roosevelt

August 7, 1933

Dear "Governor":

I have been having some conferences recently with a young Franco-American who went over-seas early and signed up with the French Foreign Legion for the War, and luckily came out alive.

He was talking to me the other day about just what the [French] government restriction of the *poilu* is. A veteran of the War cannot be called a *poilu* unless he served at least three consecutive months as an actual *combattant* in the line. All true *poilus* are registered, their records having been certified, and they are given certain privileges of life. All they have to do is to show their *carte d'identité* and they are given many things such as the purchase of railroad tickets at a thirty percent discount.

I wonder if something of this sort can't possibly be worked out through the War Office, which will serve sharply to distinguish between our actual American *poilus* and those who got over-seas and faced no more risks than those who stayed at home—these being the people who are now making the most noise.

Ever since you had the gumption and courage to lop off compensation for veterans, I have had countless letters from old patients who are veterans and who have been drawing pensions because of *bona fide* maladies which first appeared during their war service and it was a stretch of the imagination to believe that the service had anything to do with it. I have invariably replied to these people to say that there were certain things the Government could not and should not pay for and they were lucky to have gotten what compensation they already received and should make the best of it without further complaint.

Because Cushing's personal connections with FDR were well known, it is hardly surprising that he was frequently asked to intercede with the president on behalf of various interest groups. He usually dismissed such entreaties, but some causes struck a responsive chord and he felt compelled to write directly to FDR. From his early days at Johns Hopkins up to the time when he was completing his monograph on meningiomas with Louise Eisenhardt, he had been personally acquainted with the Surgeon General's Library and had used its extraordinary facilities. Moreover, he was a dedicated bibliophile, and he realized that the facilities and contents of this unique collection were outmoded and deteriorating badly.

Cushing to Roosevelt

August 21, 1933

Dear Governor:

The fact that one Sara Delano Roosevelt is my grandmother and another one my grand-daughter, and that you by some strange fate have become my stepson or brother-in-law or whatever it may be—I was never good at genealogy—is, I suppose, the reason why people like this Major Hume think I may conceivably have some influence with you and may therefore be prevailed upon to inject myself into your Blue Eagle activities.

Most things of this sort I pretend never to have received, but this one I really feel I must hand on to you.

You of course know all about the Surgeon General's Library, for which John S. Billings was originally responsible. It is the only great medical library in the world, and the Index Medicus and the Index Catalog are probably more widely used throughout the world than any medical book that has ever been published since the book of Isaiah.

I happened to be writing for this thesis which I needed and probably the only place in the world where it could be secured was in Washington. This is an indication of how the Library is continually being used by the medical profession.

The question of what to do with the Library in the future, for it will have to be moved away from the present site soon, has been a problem long agitated. The Army is very proud of it, and justly so; and though Herbert Putnam would take it with the Congressional Library, he rather thinks it better where it is, and there is a consensus of opinion among the medical profession, the Army Medical Corps and the Medical Library that the proper place for it would be in connection with the Walter Reed Hospital, for it would be convenient to the workers there and no less convenient than it now is for the general profession.

In the midst of the severe depression, no funds were available for the library. About a year later, Cushing reminded FDR once again about the Surgeon General's Library and received the following reply.

Roosevelt to Cushing

> August 25, 1934
>
> Dear Harvey:—
>
> The situation in regard to the building for the Surgeon General's Library is this.
>
> We are all tremendously keen about a new building for it.
>
> However, out of Public Works funds we must keep the District of Columbia somewhere within a reasonable ratio of expenditures compared with population, remembering that these Public Works appropriations are primarily to relieve unemployment. . . .
>
> Therefore, with much reluctance, I have to put the Surgeon General's Library building over to another year.
>
> I hope all goes well and that you are really taking care of yourself for a change.

A handwritten note on this letter, however, assured Cushing that FDR really would try to get the new building for the library started (Fig. 3).

Cushing to Roosevelt

> August 28, 1934
>
> Dear "Governor":
>
> How decent of you and how like you to remember that business of the Surgeon General's Library Building with all that you have to do!
>
> I will tip off the Surgeon General to be patient and that you haven't forgotten.
>
> Your peregrinations have been followed with huge interest. It must have been a good trip and incidentally a good rest—or as near such as you can ever get.
>
> I like to think of you just now—motoring yourself about your acres seeing things grow—as on that Boxing-day when I went with you. . . .
>
> My love to Grandma. I hope she liked George 1/5 and Mary 4/5.‡ They evidently were enamored of her—who wouldn't be?

In 1932, a Committee on Costs of Medical Care had been established by the Millbank Fund in New York City, which eventually published a report stressing the need for some type of a national health insurance program as a means of improving medical care in underdeveloped areas. The report was highly publicized and, in June 1934, FDR issued an executive order establishing a Committee on Economic Security, which consisted primarily of cabinet members slated "to study practicable measures bringing about the better distribution of medical care in the lower income groups and more satisfactory compensation of physicians and others who rendered medical service to individuals in these groups."

Frances Perkins, secretary of labor, formed a Medical Advisory Committee to the Committee on Economic Security and asked Cushing to serve on the committee. He was initially reluctant to take the assignment, but because the request for his involvement had undoubtedly come directly from the White House, he felt duty bound to participate. Although broad-based medical economics was an area outside his immediate expertise, he sought advice from a wide and assorted array of sources both at Yale University and at various interested foundations in New York.

The subject of national health insurance was no less complex in 1934 than it is now; it was an issue that raised passionate and emotional feelings on all sides. Although Cushing was personally convinced that some form of health insurance and national health legislation was inevitable, he was skeptical of the effect of the efforts of social reformers who were outside the medical profession and thus had no first-hand exposure to medical problems. He was also convinced that no meaningful social legislation affecting physicians would succeed without their full acceptance and cooperation. At the time, the American Medical Association was fiercely opposed to the specter of socialized medicine, and Cushing urged its leaders to tone down their rhetoric, believing that better results could be achieved if they cooperated in drafting reforms that were inevitable rather than maintained a reactionary opposition.

During subsequent meetings of the Medical Advisory Committee, Cushing served as a "balance wheel," essentially muting some of the stridency on both sides of the issue, urging certain preventive health measures and further study of many of these complex problems.

Cushing to Roosevelt

> (Undated)
>
> Dear Franklin:
>
> Herewith my reaction to the second meeting of the Medical Advisory Committee from which I have just returned. We were not permitted to discuss the present need or advisability of sickness insurance, far less the effect such programmes elsewhere have had upon the efficiency of the doctor. Our deliberations were restricted to the provisions in a detailed bill that was laid before us to provide for such legislation. I personally am convinced that under any such programme the participating doctor will deteriorate, only second-rate men will in the future be attracted to take up medicine as a career, and the very purpose of the legislation will thus in course of time be defeated.
>
> As things stand, the medical profession will, with good reason, believe that the Advisory Committee was maneuvered into a position of favouring the principles of sickness insurance as formulated by a group having no personal experience with medical problems, and that we were appointed merely to act as window-dressing for their prearranged programme.

He then suggested the following:

> Would it not be a good move just at this time to take into consideration the establishment—if not of a governmental department—at least a super-bureau of public health to coordinate a number of welfare agencies. . . . I know that such a fusion would be difficult owing partly to inter-departmental jealousies . . . but I am sure that opposition could be overcome and certainly would mean a great savings of energy, prevent much duplication of work and lead to a proper concentration of authority on subjects that have to do with public health.

‡ Sara Delano Roosevelt was visiting the United Kingdom, where she was received by King George V and Queen Mary.

FIG. 4. Cartoon originally published in the *New Yorker,* 1936, by Peter Arno. Roosevelt's programs were alienating conservatives, including businessman, who believed that the new tax structure was a "soak the rich" tax.

Roosevelt to Cushing

(Undated)

Dear Harvey:

I am glad that again your mind runs along with mine. I am giving much thought to the general consolidation of health and allied welfare organizations. Perhaps some day it will be a department, but I doubt if the time is wholly ripe. The difficulty is that, in the meantime, shuffling bureaus between existing departments raises much ruction.

All goes well here. I wish I had the same opportunity that you have to see our very uncommon grandchild.

In his State-of-the-Union Address in January 1935, FDR proclaimed: "The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief—the dole is a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the spirit." Roosevelt called for a program of government-created jobs not only to rescue unemployed persons from destitution but also to preserve "their self-respect, their self-reliance, courage, and determination." An interesting exchange of letters ensued.

Cushing to Roosevelt

January 6, 1935

Dear Franklin: . . .

The children had a grand time at the White House parties. Barbara says you accused me of being "high-hat" and worse than that. But I wasn't feeling so in the least—quite "low-brow" in fact while addressing the scientists in their duties to the government etc.

Your address to Congress was A++. I hope my repeated cheers on the radio did not interrupt you. I am glad you did not stress immediate sickness insurance. . . . We need more time and more local experiments with the various plans proposed if the backing of the profession is to be secured. This will be necessary to the success of any plan. . . .

I enclose something I came across last night which I imagine might interest you. Cicero's maxim I take it is yours also: that the *well-being* of the people is the most important thing. *Salus* appears to mean that as well as security and I suppose they go together.

Roosevelt to Cushing

January 15, 1935

Dear Harvey:—

I am delighted to know of that new suggestion in regard to the Medical Library. We might even add another story to the new annex and architect it to look like a pillbox!

What a grand quotation that is from Mackail! You are right about that word "salus." We have no exact equivalent though "well-being" is the nearest.

I hope the Supreme Court will remember that when they decide the Gold case.§ Also I hope they will remember one of the earliest recorded law cases where the question of the terms of the contract were considered from the point of view of "well-being." You can read all about it in a funny old play called "The Merchant of Venice."

Cushing also personally interceded with FDR on behalf of the National Academy of Sciences. The academy, originally created by an executive order of Abraham Lincoln, is the official advisory board to the federal government in all matters pertaining to science. Cushing nearly always attended the organization's annual meeting in Washington, D.C. In personal letters, he always urged FDR to address the organization or, if that were not possible, to send official greetings to be read at the opening ceremony.

In 1934, without consulting the National Academy of Sciences, the president had appointed a Scientific Advisory Board to report on certain special problems of interest to the federal government, with the Scientific Advisory Board reporting directly to the president and essentially bypassing the academy. This caused some consternation within the academy, and Cushing was asked to intercede. He promptly wrote to M. H. McIntire, the presidential assistant:

July 27, 1934

Dear Mac:

Thanks for your note. It would be so easy for the President to draw all these scientific prima donnas into his net by a pleasant word that I thought he at least ought to be given the opportunity. . . . The main thing is that it is an important body of people who have no axes to grind and who merely want to be of service, and they feel that they have been forgotten.

§ The Gold Clause Cases were a group of cases affirming the power of Congress to regulate federal currency.

There is just one thing more I do hope the President won't forget and that's to get some money allocated for the Surgeon General's Library. The entire medical profession of the country will bless him if he can get Secretary Ickes'**†† O.K. for the appropriation. The trouble is, I presume, that the Secretary is a lawyer and hasn't much interest in the needs of the medical profession.

Although by the fall of 1934 FDR's programs were responsible for a limited degree of economic recovery, they were alienating many conservatives, including businessmen, who contended that some of the measures were unconstitutional and were creating uncertainties for business (Fig. 4). At the same time, many underprivileged persons who still faced serious difficulties, believed that the New Deal had not gone far enough and were threatening to listen to demagogic leaders who promised more. To counter this potential slip in his political coalition from the left, FDR, with an overwhelming Democratic Congress that was formed as a result of the congressional elections of 1934, enacted the Social Security Act of 1935, which provided not only unemployment insurance but also old age insurance—probably still the most significant of the New Deal measures. The Works Progress Administration was created to provide jobs for people still unemployed, and in 1935, a new tax measure labeled by its opponents as a soak-the-rich tax raised the percentages to be contributed by persons with large incomes as well as big corporations, further alienating the wealthy as well as economic conservatives.

An amusing series of letters between Cushing and FDR relates to this economic background, coupled with the Supreme Court's validation of the Tennessee Valley Authority, a project designed to provide flood control, cheap hydroelectric power, and regional planning for that impoverished region. In a letter marked private, FDR wrote to Cushing of the "fat cats" (Fig. 5). Cushing responded:


THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

January 8, 1936

Private!

Dear Harvey:

I am glad that you both chortled over the speech. I wish you could read some of the comments from my friends in New York City, whom I call "fat cats". Did you ever see a "fat cat" having a fit? Not even a good veterinarian like you could cure one. The highest type of brain surgery has been tried on "fat cats" but it only makes them "fitter".

Nevertheless, I think the country will survive.

Very sincerely yours,

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Dr. Harvey Cushing,
Yale Haven Hospital,
Yale Haven,
Connecticut.

FIG. 5. Note from FDR to Harvey Cushing regarding the "fat cats."

Cushing to Roosevelt

(Undated)

Dear Franklin:

One of my "fat cat" friends in Boston having seen the announcement of our new grandchild in the same paper which announced the Supreme Court's T.V.A. [Tennessee Valley Authority] decision suggests that the child should be called Tennessee. I thought you might be interested.

P.S. You might tell son Franklin that the next time he takes Barbara to a nightclub, whether or not he allows photographs of the face to be taken, all will be over between us (Fig. 6).‡‡

Roosevelt to Cushing

February 24, 1936

Dear Harvey:—

I think Tennessee would be a splendid name for our new grandchild, provided her fond parents give her "Authority" for her middle name. That is only fair to her future husband! Notwithstanding, I prefer Kate—and so do you.

When will you ever become old enough to realize that the new generation goes to a Night Club instead of Sunday School and that being photographed there is the modern parallel of the pretty colored card you and I used to get for good behavior and perfect attendance?

Two or three years ago the young people used to smash the cameramen and their cameras. Today perhaps they are wiser.

I am so glad to hear that you are really feeling so fit again. I do hope that you will come to Washington sometime this spring. Be sure to stay at the White House this time. If you don't I will "sic" the Marines on you.

In his bid for reelection in 1936, FDR had behind him a solid political coalition—farmers, laborers, and the under-

** Harold L. Ickes (1874–1952), United States Secretary of the Interior during FDR's presidency. During the New Deal he was in charge of the Public Works Administration, which spent over $5 billion on federal and nonfederal public projects.

†† Roosevelt instructed the surgeon general to prepare legislation authorizing a new building for the library. The bill was passed, but World War II intervened and the project was dropped. Eventually, President Eisenhower signed the National Library of Medicine Act into law on August 3, 1956, making the library a civilian institution. The building was eventually constructed on the campus of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, and dedicated in December 1961.

‡‡ Barbara "Babe" Cushing, Harvey Cushing's youngest daughter. She subsequently married William Paley, chairman of Columbia Broadcasting System.

FIG. 6. Photograph of Barbara "Babe" Cushing, Harvey Cushing's youngest daughter, taken at a nightclub, circa 1936.

privileged—that was only further strengthened by imprecations from the political right. His opponent was Governor Alfred Landon of Kansas, an economic moderate who promised greater efficiency rather than a dismantling of the New Deal.

In that same year, Cushing published his book *From a Surgeon's Journal*, a compilation of his World War I diaries that he had been previously persuaded by Edward Weeks to compile and edit for the *Atlantic Monthly Press*. A copy of the book was sent to FDR, who responded warmly:

Roosevelt to Cushing

July 1, 1936

Dear Harvey:— . . .

Your book is here and I am reading it a little bit at a time—this is the greatest compliment I can pay it.

When this blankety blank campaign is over, come down and have supper with me all alone. We won't even ask the children.

On October 22, 1936, while campaigning in Hartford, Connecticut, FDR visited Cushing at his home on Whitney Avenue in New Haven for lunch. The Roosevelt retinue, consisting of the governor of Connecticut, the mayor of New Haven, the attorney general, Secret Service personnel, members of the press, Eleanor Roosevelt, Betsey, and a few of Betsey's friends, descended on the Cushing residence by pulling up on the back lawn, and a luncheon for approximately 35 ensued.

According to one of the guests in a letter to Dr. Cushing's close friend Arnold Klebs:

The President sat in the Chief's library with his head against the Vesaliana, and Betsey served him his lunch. Mrs. Cushing had played solitaire from 1:15 to 2:20 in the drawing room, but I'm afraid HC was a dash restless. The President was in no mood to leave in a hurry. He kept the crowd of 30,000 waiting on the green for an hour and half. When his car appeared, the police lost control and he could not reach the speaker's platform, and his brief address was therefore cancelled and he went on to Washington.

Another guest at the luncheon, August Hecksher, one of Cushing's friends from Yale, wrote to Cushing the same day:

Not for a long time, if at all, will any of the details of this day pass from my mind. That picture of Mr. Roosevelt, warm in his affection, gay, untroubled—in the very midst of his power and achievement—is one I shall always keep. Among the crowds where we motored afterwards there were faces I shall not forget because they looked to the President with so much faith. I believe we can look confidently towards a victory on November 3.

Cushing was so pleased with the letter that he sent it on with an accompanying note to Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, the President's personal secretary:

Cushing to LeHand

(Undated)

Dear 'Missie' [sic]:

Enclosed is a note from one of those embryo lawyers whom I asked in to see the president. I think it will warm his heart. It says better than I could just how we all feel. Please return it after he's seen it.

I wish there was something more we could do than provide a lunch, carry a sticker on a windshield, and keep our fingers crossed.

Roosevelt to Cushing

November 10, 1936

Dear Harvey:

That's a nice letter from young Heckscher and my luncheon with you and yours was even nicer. Hereafter if the only way I can lunch with you is to run for the Presidency, I shall violate all rules and do it again in 1940, 1944 and 1948.

The Yale booing was not nearly as hearty as the Harvard booing. Perhaps this is because I am a more recent graduate of Yale—they have not yet learned to know me for what I truly am.

Cushing to Roosevelt

November 19, 1936

Dear Franklin:

Kate and I have just listened to your radio talk. You have never done anything better! *Simple! Sound! Convincing!!* We did not need to be convinced as we've been with you from the first. But the doubters and the haters can't have a leg left to

stand on. I could feel through the air the sympathy for you and the understanding of 90 million followers.

The second Roosevelt term met with some initial reservations when FDR's plan to "pack the Supreme Court" to prevent the overturn of more New Deal legislation was defeated. There was labor unrest growing out of the great organizing drives of the steel, automotive, and mass production industries coupled with an economic downturn in 1937; however, by June 1938, the crises had passed and there was a decided turn for the better.

Cushing to LeHand

December 22, 1936

Dear 'Missie':

I am enclosing a letter that I want you to give the President when you think he has a moment of freedom to read it. It is about this Pure Food and Drug legislation which agitates me more than is good for my game foot. I want him to get it straight as I see it. You can read the letter if you choose, and I hope I haven't made it too long.

Now for something more pleasant. Betsey has just been spending the night with us and she had much to say about her delightful trip with you in the South. She thinks you are a grand fellow, and so do I.

In the early years of the New Deal the primary thrust was domestic policy, recovery from the devastation of the economic depression, and building better relations with the other nations of the Western Hemisphere—the good neighbor policy. By 1937, however, the clouds of significant foreign problems were becoming increasingly foreboding. Japan, which had previously occupied Manchuria, had now undertaken a new thrust into Northern China. Totalitarian forces in Spain that were supported by the Nazi regime in Germany and by Mussolini in Italy, who had seized Ethiopia, were engaged in a civil war that eventually succeeded in overthrowing the Spanish Republic. Roosevelt desired legislation that would allow him to withhold war supplies from an aggressor, but give them to a victim. Congress, however, insisted on legislation endorsing a mandatory embargo on both. There was an extremely strong isolationist sentiment in the United States, with strong proponents such as the publishers of the *Chicago Tribune*, Henry Ford and the Liberty League, the Reverend Charles Coughlin, and Charles Lindbergh.

In October 1937, in a speech given in Chicago, the heartland of isolationism, FDR proposed that peace-loving nations should make concerted efforts to quarantine aggressors:

Innocent peoples—innocent nations are being cruelly sacrificed to a greed for power. If these things come to pass in other parts of the world, let no one imagine that America will escape, that America may expect mercy, that this Western Hemisphere will not be attacked and it will continue tranquilly and peacefully.

When an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread, the community approves and joins in a quarantine of the patients in order to protect the health of the community against the spread of the disease. War is a contagion, whether it is declared or undeclared. It can engulf states and peoples remote from the original scene of hostilities.

Cushing, who had served at the front lines of World War I and who had intimate contact personally and through frequent letters with friends and colleagues in Europe and the United Kingdom, was aware of and concerned about the deteriorating situation abroad; he vigorously supported FDR's approach to the matter.

Cushing to LeHand

(Undated)

Dear 'Missie':

A small wee voice would like to register "Amen" to the President's inspired, courageous, and timely Chicago address. It was as moving as what Lincoln said at Gettysburg and will live as long.

A warm and amusing exchange of letters in December 1937, with paternal comments about Betsey (Fig.7), typifies the relationship between Cushing and FDR. The president had been bothered by an abscessed tooth that had to be extracted.

Cushing to Roosevelt

December, 1937

Dear Franklin:

Glad to have a glimpse—though brief of Betsey. She seemed very lively and full of fun—though skinny. Perhaps you are the same that is, skinny after all you have been through with that molar. It is one thing to cut a tooth as your granddaughter Kate might tell you—and quite another thing to have one cut—as you might tell her.

Why didn't you send for me? I am quite a good extractor—or was in my palmy days. Quite painless—out before you know it.

Some day when you want to take an evening off from dentists and politicians, just sit around quiet-like and look at stamps etc.—send for me and I'll come down.

Roosevelt to Cushing

December 20, 1937

Dear Harvey:

It was good to get your note via Betsey the other day. All goes well. I was joking when I suggested to her that you could take care of my jaw. My God! I would not let you come within ten feet of my jaw because your knife might slip and remove the frontal lobe of my brain.

That is a good idea of yours about an evening off. Do, when the spirit moves you, come down here and I will talk to you about your old books and mine and the future prospects of our mutual family.

In September 1938, James Roosevelt, who had been serving as administrative assistant to the president, had become increasingly disabled by a gastric ulcer, which caused him to undergo an operation at the Mayo Clinic.

Cushing to Roosevelt

8 September 1938

Dear Franklin:

When I telephoned yesterday in my agitation about Jimmy, you spoke of your proposed trip to Wisconsin which would

FIG. 7. Photograph showing FDR, Betsey Cushing Roosevelt, and Eleanor Roosevelt riding to church, circa 1937.

give you the opportunity of spending Sunday with him and were good enough to suggest that I might join you. I would have liked to do so if for no other reason than that I might be there on Monday to hold Betsey's hand. But on thinking the matter over today, I feel that it was impulsive and that my presence there might merely serve to alarm people by overemphasizing our anxiety.

What is more, the Mayos would insist on putting me up, an attention I could not well refuse. And from past experience, I know what it means for a group of surgeons to have the responsibility of too many relatives on their hands when they ought to concentrate solely on the particular job they are planning to carry through to a safe conclusion. Kate and Barbara are arriving tomorrow and I think I had better stay here and console them, much as I would have enjoyed having an all too infrequent chat with you.

Jimmy could not be in better hands, and I feel sure he will come through with flying colors and be once more restored to his normal health and vigour. Please give him my love; and I am sure that one of the Mayos will keep me posted about the operation and his subsequent progress.

The operative procedure was successful, but the stresses of the position of presidential assistant caused James Roosevelt to relinquish this assignment.

In April 1939, the Harvey Cushing Society, now known as the American Association of Neurological Surgeons, consisted of a young group of neurosurgeons, many of whom trained under and were closely associated with Cushing; they held their annual meeting in New Haven. The conclusion of the meeting was marked by a dinner celebrating Cushing's 70th birthday. Louise Eisenhardt, Cushing's faithful collaborator and president of the organization at the time, sent a formal invitation to President Roosevelt to attend the affair.

Eisenhardt to Roosevelt

March 31, 1939

Dear President Roosevelt:

The Harvey Cushing Society cordially invites you to be its guest at its eighth Annual Meeting, to be held in New Haven, Connecticut on April sixth, seventh, and eighth, 1939. I am enclosing a copy of the program. At the dinner on Saturday evening, April eighth, there will be a special celebration of Doctor Cushing's seventieth birthday.

Sincerely yours,

Louise Eisenhardt

Roosevelt was unable to attend but sent this reply, which was read at the dinner:

Roosevelt to Eisenhardt

April 6, 1939

Dear Dr. Eisenhardt:

It is hard to believe that Harvey Cushing is about to reach the so-called Scriptural age. He does not fit into the picture that we associate with three score and ten.

The spirit of eternal youth is his. And that is not only his good fortune but the good fortune of all those who are privileged to call him friend. I think, too, it accounts for the fact that there has been no slowing down in his zest for life and for his work—a work which makes the human race his debtor and which has won him the plaudits of the great and the eternal gratitude of all sorts and conditions of men.

I join heartily with the Harvey Cushing Society in the birthday celebration. May he long be spared to carry on his benefi-

cent work to promote the cause of science and the welfare of his fellow men.

I realize, of course, that in these later years Harvey Cushing has labored under that most severe of all human handicaps—relationship with the President of the United States. His courage and cheerful disposition in the face of this travail proves his eternal greatness.

In responding to the tribute from members of the society and close friends, Dr. Cushing closed his brief remarks at the dinner with this excerpt from the Talmud, which aptly describes what had been his approach to life:

The day is short and the work is great. The reward is also great and the Master praises. It is not incumbent on thee to complete the work, but thou must not therefore cease from it.

Cushing to Roosevelt

April 10, 1939

Dear Franklin:

How you find time midst wars and threats of wars to do so many thoughtful personal acts of kindness is quite beyond me.

Your letter read at my B-d party was just like you and its humourous twist brought down the house.

Though it proved to be quite an occasion with something of an international flavor I'm still wearing the same sized hat (Fig. 8).

The political situation in Europe continued to deteriorate, culminating in Germany's invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Cushing, who was becoming increasingly infirm with circulatory problems, had embarked on a project of translating and compiling a biography/bibliography of Vesalius, a task that he attacked with his characteristic focused determination. He was, however, becoming extremely distracted by the ominous news from abroad and thought of his old friends, pupils, and colleagues in Europe. On September 11, 1939, he wrote his dear friend, Arnold Klebs:

I have been sadly remiss as a correspondent of late. Altogether too much time has been passed glued to the radio—a habit easily acquired—but I have now sworn off and the world can go to the bow-wows for all my listening in can prevent. I will hear news about it when it is all over. . . . The summer which is gone on the wings of the wind. I have as you well know, given over once more to the Vesalius whose books are spilled all over the dining room table, expanded with extra leaves to fill the room. I begin to think he is a dangerous man to deal with for renewing my acquaintance with him seems to have precipitated World War II.

In a note to Betsey Cushing Roosevelt dated October 2, 1939, Cushing wrote:

Dear Bets, . . .

Give Pa my love when you see him. He is carrying a frightfully heavy load and no one else could possibly do it as well.

Afterword: 1939 and Beyond

Harvey Cushing, aged 70 years, died of a heart attack on October 7, 1939. James and Betsey Roosevelt had two children, Sara born in 1933 and Kate in 1936, who were often referred to by Cushing and FDR as their "common, uncommon grandchildren." James and Betsey's marriage

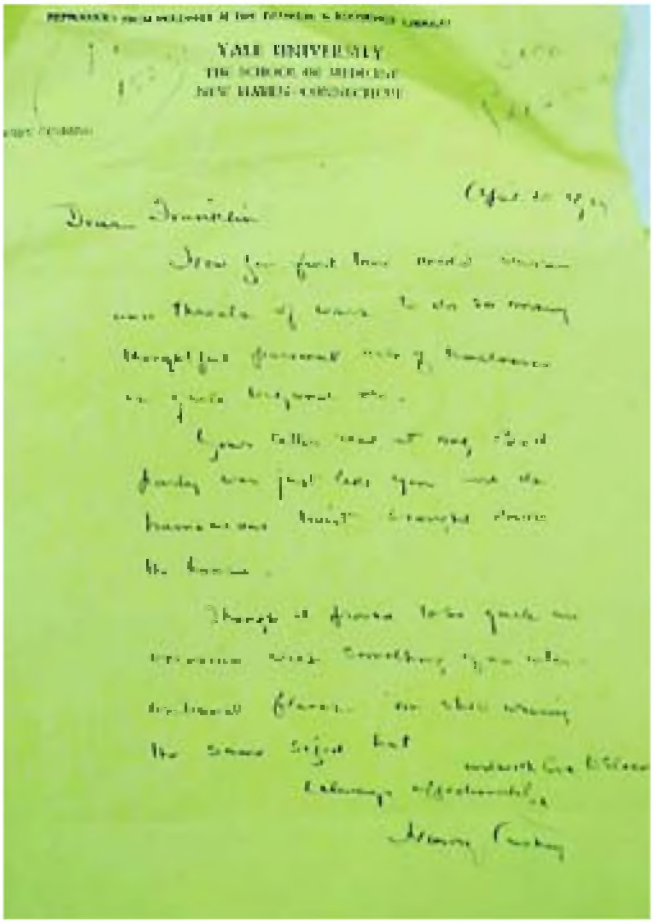

FIG. 8. Handwritten note from Harvey Cushing to FDR.

became increasingly strained, and the couple divorced in March 1940. Betsey subsequently married John Hay (Jock) Whitney in March 1942; she died in 1998. Whitney served as ambassador to the Court of St. James during the Eisenhower administration, where Betsey renewed a close friendship with Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, whom she had initially met when the Queen Mother visited the White House and Hyde Park in 1939. James Roosevelt had several remarriages and divorces. He became a representative to the United States Congress from California in 1954 and served for six terms. He died in 1991 at the age of 83 years.

President Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage on April 12, 1945. Germany surrendered to the Allies on May 8, 1945, and Japan capitulated on August 15, 1945.

Discussion

This is a story of the personal relationship between two fascinating and charismatic individuals. The men were brought together by the marriage of their children and their relationship played out against a background of tumultuous times. Each man was an icon in his own right. Although temperamentally and intellectually they were quite different, their relationship was characterized by mutual warmth, affection, and respect.

Cushing and FDR shared somewhat similar back-

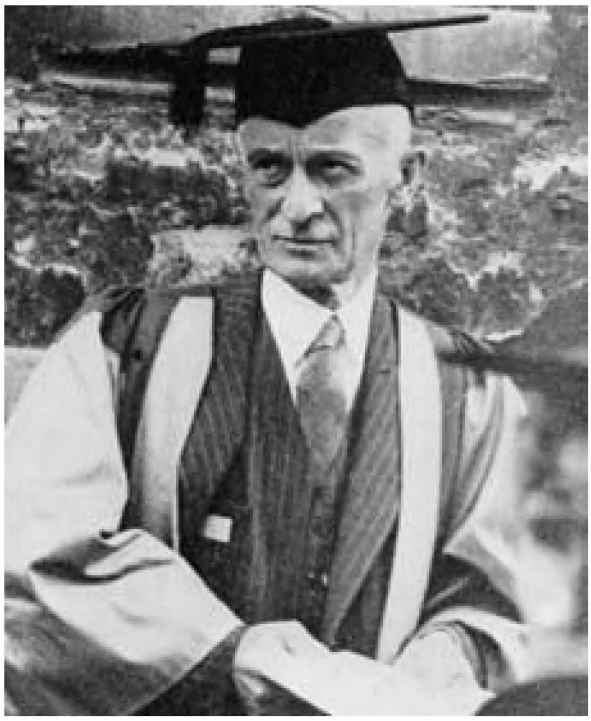

FIG. 9. Photograph of Harvey Cushing, circa 1938, obtained on the occasion of his receiving an honorary degree from Oxford University.

FIG. 10. A characteristic photograph of FDR, demonstrating his ebullient smile.

grounds. Both men came from comfortable economic circumstances, the more so in FDR's case, and both were educated at Ivy League undergraduate and graduate institutions. Each proceeded to build his own career. For Cushing, the career path was much more straightforward, focused, and disciplined: surgery followed by neurological surgery; exposure to important mentors in the United States and Europe; challenges of accepting as a full-time endeavor brain surgery, which was then a most discouraging area; and later the development and refining of neurosurgery into an acceptable clinical discipline. Cushing utilized his large clinical practice as a laboratory, meticulously observing and documenting his ongoing successes and failures. All the while, he instructed, encouraged, and demanded an ongoing stream of trainees to expand and improve on his results.

For FDR, the path was more circuitous. His undergraduate and law school records were marked more by social than academic achievements. His early law practice was almost casual. Nevertheless, he was warm, handsome, charming, and opportunistic; and these qualities propelled him into New York State politics, where his full talents began to emerge. He was exposed to the national scene, initially as assistant secretary of the Navy in World War I, and then as the Democratic Party nominee for vice president in 1920. Then, tragedy struck with an attack of polio during the summer of 1921, leaving him unable to stand and walk unassisted thereafter. This was undoubtedly the pivotal point in his career.

It would have been simple to return to his Hyde Park estate and become a gentleman farmer. That FDR used this catastrophe to mature, grow, and plumb the depths of his inner resources rather than succumb to self-pity would prove to be most fortunate for the nation and the free world.

Although much of the correspondence between Cushing and FDR was light, whimsical, and personal, Cushing used his unique relationship with the president to champion certain medical issues he thought important. He was most persistent with his entreaties on behalf of the Surgeon General's Library, even at a time when financial resources for public expenditures of this sort were scarce. What is more intriguing, however, relates to his service on the Medical Advisory Committee to the Committee on Economic Security, which dealt with sickness insurance and the potential ramifications of such legislation on the medical profession.

When Cushing was recruited for the position at Harvard University, with the forthcoming opening of the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, he insisted that facilities be provided for paying patients, although the original request of Peter Bent Brigham mandated that the hospital be constructed for the care of indigent persons. Cushing firmly resisted this arrangement, believing that it was important for a university hospital to expand its influence free from local constraints. Moreover, he believed that financial reward from clinical practice should, at least in part, be returned to the physician who provided the service. He had little personal interest in great wealth, although his reputation surely could have secured substantial fees. His lifestyle was relatively modest, consisting mostly of work, writing, and professional traveling. His one indulgence was that of rare books. If patients could pay for his services, they did; but there were many patients whom he surgically treated and retreated without any expectation of payment. A substantial portion of fees generated from patients of considerable financial resources was returned to the hospital and medical school to be used for the construction and enhancement of laboratory facilities or fellowships for further education and travel by Cushing's trainees.

Although Cushing believed that health insurance of

some type was inevitable, he was disdainful of social reformers outside of medicine imposing their opinions on practicing physicians. Cushing also believed that, for any major change in the organization of medical practice to be successfully implemented, it must be accepted and embraced by the majority of physicians.

It would be a mischaracterization to describe FDR and Cushing as close friends. Although they corresponded frequently, their personal meetings were rare. Because of both his position and disability, the president was constrained from traveling for purely personal or social events. Cushing in his later years was plagued by peptic ulcers and vascular insufficiency of the lower extremities. Although he traveled to Europe and within the United States to professional meetings, to deliver dissertations, to receive honorary degrees, or to indulge in his bibliophilic pursuits, he was disinclined to socialize for purely personal reasons. He had always been indifferent to ceremonial events, except perhaps when he was center stage; and, although he was invited to FDR's inaugurations and other White House social affairs, he habitually turned down the offers.

Harvey Cushing (Fig. 9) was self-contained and apolitical—a perfectionist utterly devoted to his own beliefs. A rigid taskmaster with a sustained capacity for concentration and work, he was demanding of and uncompromising with himself, as well as in his relations with his family, contemporaries, and assistants. Yet this "controlled daemon" (as he was labeled by the British neurosurgeon Sir Geoffrey Jefferson in a 1943 memoir of Cushing) inspired loyalty, although not always affection, because of the magnitude of his efforts and achievements. He was not, however, a single-minded personal and scientific ascetic. A man of many moods, he could be a witty, albeit mercurial, charming friend and companion, with insightful observations expressed in polished words and phrases delivered in high style. Many of his essays, honorary addresses, and even scientific monographs are still a pleasure to read for their unexpected, but pitch-perfect elegance.

By contrast, FDR (Fig. 10) once described uncharitably and mistakenly as having a "second class intellect, but first class temperament"§§ was a complete, albeit most complex politician. He was supremely confident in his own abilities, was personable, and had an intellectual gaiety and a zest for new ideas. Winston Churchill said that meeting FDR was "like uncorking your first bottle of champagne." Whatever inner doubts he might have had he kept to himself, remaining calm and ebullient despite extraordinary difficulties, foreign and domestic. Utterly charming, gregarious, with a personal warmth and informality, he was a master of timing, being daring, devious, and cautious as circumstances dictated. "I am a juggler," he once said of himself. "I never let my right hand know what my left hand does."

Cushing, as was true for many persons of his background, experience, and temperament, was hardly enthusiastic about much of the social legislation enacted by Roosevelt's New Deal. In truth, FDR himself was far from a committed social and economic liberal. He was, however, acutely cognizant of the realities faced by the nation. Circumstances, as he saw them, demanded that sweeping changes be made, and he was prepared to make them.

Foreign policy was a different matter. Cushing had traveled frequently in Europe and the United Kingdom and had close friends and colleagues abroad. He perceived the threat of totalitarian regimes early during the 1930s. Although he had personally experienced the horrors of war while serving in front-line hospitals in France during World War I, he realized that the dangers of America's isolation from the rest of the world would be counterproductive. Accordingly, he supported wholeheartedly FDR's reluctant, but gradually increasing interventionist moves.

Although no position is comparable to that of the president of the United States, the correspondence between FDR and Cushing reflects a personal relationship between equals. Much of the subject matter in the letters is light, but the letters themselves are characteristic of two individuals who were deeply engaged, thought precisely, and cared about writing well, finding the precise word or phrase to truly express their feelings. They were two accomplished professionals with different talents and expertise; each with a firm sense of self, coupled with respect and admiration for the other, functioning with ease and style at the top of their game.

These were no ordinary times. And most certainly, these were no ordinary men.

Sources

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§§ This assessment was rendered by Oliver Wendell Holmes, associate justice of the United States Supreme Court.

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